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Karen Schmidt, Head of Acquisitions, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Katina Strauch

Against the Grain

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Interview with Karen Schmidt

Head of Acquisitions, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

by Katina Strauch (College of Charleston)

You have all seen and heard of that little guy Jacob, the new Schmidt on the block. Besides having a child two years' old and a full time job, the vivacious Karen Schmidt is running for political office on November 9! You heard it right. She says she needed a way to get past the "terrible twos" and into the "trusting threes." Read on. — KS

ATG: Karen, hey and good luck! What are you running for?

KS: I am running for state representative in the 87th district of Illinois. It is mostly a very rural area that covers from Bloomington halfway to Chicago and over to Peoria. It is a grassroots campaign. Since I am poor, I am organizing it in the grand tradition of librarianship.

ATG: How did this happen?

KS: I found out through some political friends that a man who I was very unhappy with was running unopposed in the primary. Since I cared about some of the issues, they talked to me about running and I said "Why not?"

State representatives are public servants and librarianship has everything to do with public service. I am running as a librarian and that's a part of my whole campaign background. I am an educator. Illinois is 48th in educational funding behind Mississippi. Education is funded by property taxes. We are talking about schools in this state that have to collect cash register receipts from grocery stores to buy computers. People think that Illinois is a pretty sophisticated state, but not everybody lives in a wealthy area. Education is a big issue for a lot of people in the state.

ATG: Tell us about yourself.

KS: I was born in Niagara Falls. My mom and dad are both from big families. When I was young, dad (a product engineer) was transferred to the foothills of



the Appalachians to a poor community where I grew up. The really small, rural town had about 5-6,000 people. My mom ended up running the county library though she was not a degreed librarian. That had a lot to do with my becoming a librarian. I didn't go home to an empty house after school, I went to Mom's library where I learned to alphabetize the children's collection. There were older women working there who were trained in WPA book repair and they taught me book repair. Every summer I went out

"... the theory was that if you knew about the book, you knew enough to buy it."

into the hills in the Bookmobile. It was an important experience. I learned what libraries were about.

I have two older brothers. My parents were amazingly well organized so we are all six years apart. The idea of sending us to college was a big deal for them and the space between us gave them a couple of years to recoup expenses. I graduated from high school and went to Indiana. I got my degree in anthropology, but there were only so many spaces for Margaret Mead so in my senior year

I took a couple of library courses. Then I got offered a scholarship to the Indiana University Library School.

ATG: So, how did you wind up at Illinois? Are you still working?

KS: Oh yes. The campaign is only two weeks old though, and I can see that in terms of getting myself up to speed and conversant with the issues, I am going to need to take time off and do research. It's good that I work in such a wonderful library. My colleagues are very supportive. They think that I can do this and that it's not a weird idea. That makes me feel good.

ATG: Tell us more about your job and about your acquisitions department.

KS: I have done this job since late 1982 — 12 years. The library was reorganized under **Hugh Atkinson** in the 70s and the theory was that if you knew about the book, you knew enough to buy it.

We handle all the monographs and serials for all Roman alphabet materials plus binding and marking. My staff is 30 people including two librarians. We have extensive American and European approval plans. We are very much a production unit. We do no bibliographic searching, in fact we don't even have a BIP in the department.

We are also totally manual, no automated acquisitions system, though our orders show up in the online catalog and we have an automated accounting system. We are automating serials checking (Innovac). We do basic ordering, claiming and receipt. We order about 20,000 separate monographs a year and have a heavy gifts and exchange program. We try to get orders out in 24 hours. We are probably the only library in the U.S. (along with the Library of Congress?) that has 3x5 manual, handwritten continuations cards.

We have done a lot of streamlining of procedures. The Department used to have 5 librarians. We have tried to get it down

to a routine. Now I have regular support staff, and my input is putting together vendor selection guidelines, use guidelines for vendors, and when not to go to vendors. Sort of a Cadillac service.

ATG: How have you seen your job change in 12 years?

KS: It has changed quite a bit. I have become more and more involved in collection development, and acquisitions and collection development are more aligned in our library. **Carl Deal**, director of collections, has been on sabbatical. We have been mutually supportive and have used acquisitions and collection development to the benefit of the whole library.

Getting more involved in collection development has kept me from getting bored, that and writing and research. The first 8-10 years in Acquisitions, no one knows anything and every day you learn something new. And that's still the case, just to a lesser degree. Acquisitions is one of those areas that you can do all your life. There is so much going on, not just in the library but in the business world. You are always learning something and, so, you get a real sense of accomplishment. Acquisitions is part of the continuum that helps people get satisfaction.

ATG: What job did you have before this job?

KS: I started as a Latin American cataloger at Ohio State, then I became Latin American bibliographer. I realized that I needed a degree in that field if I was going to stay in it. So, when a technical services job came open in acquisitions, I knew zip-o. I remember one of my new staff showing me an invoice from a vendor that had symbols like TOS and NYP. I had no idea what they meant so I went to the not-very-big library science collection to find out what the symbols meant. I was humiliated. It was an environment I knew nothing about.

From then on, I got more and more interested in acquisitions. I learned that the education in acquisitions came from the vendors. People like **Dimi Berkner** (then at Taylor Carlyle), **Jim Herrick** (I think he was at Blackwell), and **Doyle Pickett** (B&T). They took a lot of time explaining to me how they made money and they told me the questions I should

be asking. Then in 1980 I went to ALA in New York and went to the first acquisitions preconference. My roommate was **Gay Dannelly**. I'll always remember that **Harriett Rebuldela** was next door. She was an important name in acquisitions and she was right next door. I was rubbing shoulders with people who knew a lot about acquisitions!

ATG: What were the issues back then?

KS: In acquisitions, the big thing was vendor relations and ethics. Also the whole idea of costing out different services. People began talking about discounts and the notion that great discounts weren't great service. That's the first time that I became aware of the people working on saving a few pennies. There was a growing relationship with European publishers. They were opening U.S. offices and there was a lot of discussion about country of origin buying, U.S. or U.K.

What galvanized our area of

"Acquisitions is part of the continuum that helps people get satisfaction."

librarianship was **Joe Hewitt's** essay on who the acquisitions librarian was. In the 70s and 80s, acquisitions librarians were seeking and finding an identity, and it was an important part of the acquisitions process. You were all by yourself in the library. Nobody trained you and you felt incredibly isolated. I remember when I started working at Illinois, there was really nobody else to go to to learn the nature of the problems that I was dealing with.

There are certain fundamental things that a person in acquisitions has to know. Like how a book is published, how we buy them, not to mention business considerations. We are a subdiscipline of librarianship just like cataloging and reference. And we began to come together and are still coming together at ALA, at the Charleston Conference, on ACQNET, at Oklahoma, at Feather River.

It has been great working at the University of Illinois which has an excellent library school. In dealing with acquisitions there the past five or six years, I

feel I have contributed to the profession and done something really positive for it. I've always had 4 or so practicum students who want to learn about acquisitions and Illinois is still one of the places with assistant acquisitions librarians.

ATG: Who are some of your other mentors?

KS: I guess I have different kinds of mentors who have influenced me in different kinds of ways. **Joe Barker** and **Christian Boissonnas** have really been very important to me. One person who is really fabulous is **Norman Stephens**, who has recently retired from the University of Connecticut. He's a cool man, with his Molesworth Institute at his house. I remember when I interviewed for a job with him that I didn't get. Still, it was one of the better experiences of my life. There was **Hugh Atkinson**, early on before I knew anything about anything. He had an ecumenical view of libraries. He was an unstructured person, and he didn't stand a whole lot on ceremony. He overlooked hierarchy. All ideas were possible. I realize now how wonderful he was.

ATG: Can you comment on the future for acquisitions librarians?

KS: What is happening in acquisitions is that the definition is getting broader. There is the whole issue of access versus ownership and I think acquisitions skills are becoming more and more relevant in ILL and in circulation. The traditional definitions are fading away. We have access to services rather than compartmentalized access to collections. That is good. At Illinois we are starting to charge for ILL. We are acquiring material, then, and we have parallel procedures in Acquisitions and ILL, with the same goal. In redefining how libraries work, acquisitions must jump into the whole conversation.

ATG: What about the Internet? I think that people need librarians and libraries even more as they try to get through the quagmire of the Net, don't you?

KS: It has a definite professional role, yes. My position is so far removed from

the end user that I get my jollies by looking down the line and imagining the end user. If I have any regrets about the road I took, it's that I don't spend that much time with the end user. In an institution my size you get pigeon-holed. There are days that I don't even see a book. But I do have the sense that we are making an impact on society and I hope you are right about us becoming more and more useful to society.

ATG: Tell us about the research that you are engaged in. Also you have other writing interests, don't you? And are you going to keep working when you win the election?

KS: I have 2 major areas. The first is the focus of my dissertation — education for acquisitions. The fact that the University of Illinois has the ALA archives has fueled my interest in the second area — library history. The ALA archives are an incredible gold mine of photographs and memorabilia. There are things like the Faxon collection which is fascinating.

I really enjoy the process of writing and publishing and research. One of many things I picked up in doing my Ph.D. (which I got in 1989) and in working on articles, is the importance of objectivity in library research.

If I win the election, I don't know what will happen. I think that I should do that full time if I take on the responsibility, sort of the fact that ethically, I owe full time work to the people who elected me. I guess I am already on the state payroll and I don't know if I can continue to work. In any case, I will continue to write.

What I really want to do is freelance writing about things that have nothing to do with librarianship. If I don't win the election, I'll take a sabbatical and work on a book about marketing with some of the people on our campus. Really I haven't thought past the election on November 9. If I lose, it's okay. I have a perfectly happy working life.

ATG: You should think positive! I'll bet you win! Can we get to your marketing book for a minute? One thing we are trying in this issue of ATG is a new

column on "marketing to libraries." The first column talks about publishers' catalogs. I think that, as the marketplace continues to heat up, that advertising and marketing of products is going to become more and more important.

KS: I agree. I am really interested in marketing because I once heard a librarian tell a publisher that all librarians throw out their catalogs. I thought, "oh my gosh, we need publishers' catalogs!" And it scares me that publishers might be drawing conclusions from one statement like that. Actually, people like Lyman Newlin, the people minding the store, telling us about deals and what is going on out there, are the people and services we need. In research libraries, I really value the blurbs from vendors and from people like Lyman telling me when something special is coming along. I respond to that more than I do to a generalized mailing. I know that's a hard thing for publishers to deal with. Is a publisher's rep valuable? Who should

"In redefining how libraries work, acquisitions must jump into the whole conversation."

get the blurbs — the selector or the acquisitions librarian? There are so many different levels of people and so many different types of setups at the various institutions.

ATG: The mailing list. Until I started with ATG, I never realized how very important the mailing list is. And how much work it is. And how difficult it is to build one up and keep it current and accurate.

KS: Yes. That is really true. I respect and appreciate how important the mailing list is. It is important with my campaign. Who do I buy it from? How much does it cost? Is it worth the money? Can I afford it?

Since the birth of my son Jacob, I've been noticing the catalogs we get sent. It's fascinating. I filled out one of those supermarket surveys in the name of my cat, Yoko, one time, and I saved all of the mail. She had a huge box in 6 months' time and she still occasionally gets things. I also have a bear named Rupert who

gets stuff in the mail.

ATG: Tell us more about the fun you have in life. Do you have any other children?

KS: Jacob is our only kid so far. We have a lot of cats — 3 1/2 since we live out in the country and it's hard to turn them away when they show up. The half a cat is Raymond Purr. He was starving and I couldn't turn him away but I haven't let him into the house yet or taken him to the vet.

For fun I also grow herbs — basil, oregano, marjoram — and dry them. I have lots of baby food jars filled with dried herbs. Sometimes I sell them and give the proceeds to my favorite charity. It's sort of my own cottage industry.

My husband's and my serious hobby is collecting magnets like the kind you put on your refrigerator. We have a collection from all over the world, the tackier the better. I think we have most of the states of the Union and Canada. When I got

back from Australia last year, I brought back 400 magnets. I was concerned that the plane wouldn't know which way was North, but they

didn't seem to bother anybody and Customs didn't say anything.

ATG: What is your reading life like?

KS: I read lots of mysteries and I really like women's diaries particularly like the pioneer diaries. But who gets to read, these days? It's funny the way a child changes your life. My husband says that the first year of Jacob's life I never finished a cup of tea. It was recently a major big deal to go see *The Piano*. Now it's easier to rent videos. Still, I'm a member of the mystery book club and I love Sue Grafton. I think I'm up to the letter 'e.' I also love Sara Paretsky. ☞

Well, that's it, y'all! When we last talked, Karen was off for a weekend of parades and speeches, all with Jacob at her side. "The weekends are getting weird," she said. "There are only 11 left till the end of the election." GOOD LUCK, Karen! — KS